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The Comedic Devices of Tragedy: Inter-Generic Dialogic Effects in Hardy and Shakespeare

Patrick Lawrence

Bakhtin argues in “Discourse in the Novel” that the novel draws its *novelty* from its functioning in and as conversation with and among various styles and languages, each elucidating and augmenting the others within the single text, and all of them tending towards—though never fully attaining—a unity of voice in service to the aesthetic project of the work as a whole. He writes:

The stylistic uniqueness of the novel as a genre consists precisely in the combination of these subordinated, yet still relatively autonomous, unities (even at times comprised of different languages) into the higher unity of the work as a whole: the style of a novel is to be found in the combination of its styles; the language of a novel is the system of its “languages.” (Bakhtin 262)

It is important that, despite this general tendency towards systematicity, Bakhtin always scrupulously notes that the various languages never combine within the novel into a single, unitary language. Further, while they often contribute to a specific aesthetic principle, their heteroglossia is never fully contained by that function. Instead, the unique and interesting characteristic of this new function of languages is that by acting in concert, they turn the novel into a zone in which no single language, principle, or voice can appear as complete or self-contained. Rather, each language is relativized, or “dialogized,” and is thus stripped of its status as unitary or unquestioned.¹ For Bakhtin, this juxtaposition of autonomous voices is the

fundamental method of the novel for creating meaning in its particular way, a method that produces effects not possible in other non-dialogic forms.

Interestingly, independent styles and languages do not speak only as distinct utterances in conflict or harmony with each other as they do in the competing dialogue of characters from different social strata. They also operate as animating tensions within single utterances. In discussing the use of these “hybrid constructions” in the creation of ironic phrases in Dickens, Bakhtin writes:

What we are calling a hybrid construction is an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two “languages,” two semantic and axiological belief systems. (Bakhtin 304)

As Bakhtin sees it, this internally-animating double-voicedness is one of the hallmarks of the new dialogic literary paradigm that the novel represents. While double-voicedness operates in this conception primarily as an interchange of languages and styles, thinking of the entire novel as an utterance unto itself, it can also be understood as an intercourse of genres (which can, themselves be seen to operate like languages). Further, while Bakhtin identified dialogism as the unique and defining feature of the novel, thinking in terms of this inter-generic (as opposed to only inter-linguistic or inter-stylistic) dialogism can expose the productive tensions at play in a variety of literary works, even beyond the bounds of the novelistic medium. A brief survey with this in mind should reveal dialogic elements functioning in a broad range of media, genres, and periods.²

In fact, many scholars have noted the presence of dialogic elements at work before Dostoevsky (where Bakhtin identified their genesis), including, especially, Shakespeare.

Bakhtin, of course, contends in *The Dialogic Imagination* that drama, except in a narrow set of circumstances, is not dialogic. Bernadette Meyler, however, argues the contrary in the case of Shakespeare, noting that the conception of dramatic monologism that Bakhtin seems to have been working with was a classical notion that does not easily overlay with Shakespearean drama:

The strictures of classical tragedy against which these objections speak are notoriously not maintained in Shakespeare.... The stance of Shakespeare's villain is frequently fleshed out as fully as his hero's, and antitheses are not always reconciled at the conclusion of his plays. (Meyler 110)

Meyler also finds evidence of this dialogism in the discourse the plays carry out with their source texts. In the case of *The Merchant of Venice*, she ascribes responsibility for a lack of closure to this dialogic intertext:

The polyphony of Shakespeare's play is also achieved through reference to other earlier discourses, those of the source tale, Giovanni's 'Il Pecorone,' and Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta*. The last scene in which Shylock is present on stage combines both narratives without deciding between them and thus endows his fate with a fundamental ambivalence. (Meyler 113)

The potential for dramatic ambivalence is one of the most striking implications of dialogism in Shakespeare's plays. By simultaneously deploying discourses that lead to differing, or even antithetical, conclusions, the plays create a more dynamic aesthetic than would be possible in a monologic framework.

Martine van Elk's "Urban Misidentification in *The Comedy of Errors* and the Cony-Catching Pamphlets" explores the extent of intertextuality that existed between the eponymous play and pamphlets circulating in Shakespeare's time that both sensationalized street grift and

warned readers about its perils.³ Van Elk also establishes a double-voiced effect, specifically in the use of misidentification in the play, which, when deployed in the context of the performance serves not only its comedic purpose, but recalls for the audience the discourse of the Cony Catching Pamphlets, a partly-admonitory discourse that would have suggested issues related to urban life: crime, the flexibility of identity, and the possibility of anonymity. Thus, the two discourse: sinister and comedic, operate in concert, with the presence of the unsettling aspect of cony catching amplifying the dramatic experience of the plot complication.

The dialogic effect is also, not surprisingly, found in the dialogue itself. Mikita Hoy examines the function of the dialogue of fools in Shakespeare—especially Lear’s fool—and finds it to be parodic in a specifically dialogic way, parroting speech borrowed from a variety of registers or languages in such a way as to twist its meaning through new juxtapositions.

This kind of ironic, self-reflecting parody of the dialogism inherent in language is often the style of the traditional fool, who mocks others’ uses of words by using them himself. Shakespeare’s Fool in *King Lear*, for example, is introduced into the text partly for purposes of “making strange” (*ostranenie*) the world of conventional pathos by making Lear’s dramatic, aristocratic language of suffering seem distant and unreal when it is cited beside similar meanings couched in the Fool’s own folkloric, nursery riddles. (Hoy 770)⁴

This pirating of discourses simultaneously makes its ironic or localized point relative to the words it has borrowed, *and* it dispels the illusion of rigid class boundaries that accompany social and generic languages. A fool may borrow a king’s words as well as a beggar’s, and in so doing he may reveal that the difference between them is not as profound as it might seem. A fool’s speech demonstrates that words, phrases, and pathetic registers are not restricted to authorized

usages, that they provoke their own deconstruction, and ultimately suggest the fluidity of their own signification—even as they are deployed with an eye towards the centrifugality of their meaning that promotes their being understood.

In addition to these other forms of dialogism at work in Shakespeare's plays, generic dialogism carries the potential for even more intriguing effects, since it is both common and a rich and productive method of meaning-making in drama as well as fiction. John D. Dorst writes that, "As effective social forces, genres are rhetorical and ideological; they engage one another actively. Any given genre is overcast to some degree by the shadows of other genres in its cultural environment" (Dorst 414). Dorst also identifies the evidence in Bakhtin's theories that support the extension of the dialogic into the realm of genre and suggests that all genres are conglomerates of multiple discourses aggregated from an ever-changing flux of methods and material, rather than codified and discreet entities:

[A conception of genres as social forces] throws open the issue of generic interaction. A sociological poetics recognizes that there are no pure genres; no genre exists outside the dense thickets of citation, commentary, resistance, approval, mimicry, parody, and so on, that constitute the responses of other points of view (i.e., other genres). (Dorst 415)

Thus all generic production, for Dorst and Bakhtin, is a dialogic process in which the devices and elements associated with the genre are deployed in a centrifugal manner, arranged to express a social worldview, but they do so in a heteroglot space in which their meaning and signification cannot happen without the influence of other associated genres.

In the pantheon of this generic dialogic exchange, that operating between tragedy and comedy is especially provocative, in part because of the popular conception of their antithetical natures. In the context of Shakespearean drama, the contact between the genres has been the

subject of a good deal of discourse. In response to another writer (Bethell) who argues that there is no comedy in *Henry VI, Part 3*, Waldo McNeir writes:

He can't be right, if laughter and tears are psychological cousins; or if comedy and tragedy alike sprang, both in ancient Greece and medieval Europe, from rites developing in different directions; or if we believe, in any sense, that Hamlet's intellectualizing and agonizing make him a potentially ridiculous fellow, saved from being so because Polonius is Hamlet turned comic-side out, or that Antony and Cleopatra is a see-saw affair that celebrates the triumph of Love and the triumph of Folly as inseparable.

(McNeir 51)

McNeir's suggestion is that comedy and tragedy are nearly always united, and that the devices and characteristics of one are often reminiscent of the other and of their shared heritage. Throughout Shakespeare's works, he finds evidence of the comic in the tragic and vice versa. Dorst findings in his analysis of folklore suggest why this might be the case. The most productive generic interactions, he contends, come from clashes—like that between comedy and tragedy—with no clearly superior party: "When two (or more) genres actively encounter one another but neither clearly dominates, possibilities for generic ambiguity proliferate" (Dorst 416). This is the case with tragedy and comedy, which both herald from the same illustrious bloodline, and both count among their constituent numbers some of the most influential works of artistic production in the Western canon. Further, Dorst's mentioning of generic ambiguity echoes the ambivalence that Meyler says is the result of source-text polyphony. This indicates that the result of the dialogic effect in Shakespeare—in its many facets—is a questioning of the fixed generic status of the plays, and the introduction of the possibility of generic indeterminacy.

Through this application of Bakhtin's theory beyond the scope he traced for it in *The Dialogic Imagination*, it is possible to break open some aspects of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (*Lr.*), *Othello* (*Oth.*), and *Much Ado About Nothing* (*Ado*), as well as Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* by reading them in terms of an animating dialogism at work not only between the novel and the plays, with each representing a dialogized authorial or historical entity, but specifically between the elements of tragedy and comedy in each, an aspect of the operating inter-generic dialogue at work in the English canon.

This effect, spanning backwards and forwards in time, re-arranges the thematic and dramatic potential of all four works by creating a continuum between the older works and the more recent and between the apparently-conflicting genres. The dialogic axis between comedy and tragedy has been explored by the above-mentioned writers and by others, as has that operating between Shakespeare's plays and other dramatic works by Shakespeare's contemporaries.⁵ Still, little has yet been written about the way that the productive dialogism at work among these plays has been appropriated and reiterated in later works outside the dramatic frame (or can be understood as having done so). In the context of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, it seems especially useful to understand the complex and contradictory forces at play in tragedy, because the novel has so often been read in terms of its fulfillment of an accepted set of tragic conventions and its participation in that tradition.

Hardy's novels, according to Ted Spivey, share a common thread among their protagonists. It is a refusal to adhere to the dictates of destiny, and it amplifies those heroes, makes them into larger-than-life characters enduring struggles that become, for that reason, to a certain extent, universal. He also finds that the tradition that Hardy invokes in doing this brings him into line with Shakespeare: "In his great novels—*The Return of the Native*, *Jude the*

Obscure, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, and The Mayor of Casterbridge—Hardy saw man beaten down by forces within and without himself and sought to record man's eternal struggle with fate. This is also what the Greeks and Shakespeare do." (Spivey 181). The defiance of this fate (Spivey, citing F.L.Lucas, calls it "doomed defiance") is of a part with tragedy's generic effect, which amplifies the struggles of man to the level of "awe and terror" through a combination of internal and external forces, and of blindness and insight. The tragic hero must at first blunder into ill fortune because of his fatal flaw, and eventually gain insight into that flaw:

The forces of destruction come from within and without. Tragic awe and terror result from seeing a passionate but noble person defy and finally accept the forces of destruction. ... Despite their flaws we sympathize with Hardy's characters. Their passion and their ability to suffer help to reveal their great worth. The characters finally prove themselves to be far nobler than the forces that destroy them. (Spivey 185)

Like Spivey, John Paterson also sees as paramount that the hero have some level of insight into his fate, and finds it in Hardy's tragic hero, Henchard, who, when faced with his many misfortunes, "will be forced, like Oedipus and Faust and Lear, to rediscover in suffering and sorrow the actuality of the moral power he had so recklessly flouted" (Paterson 153).

And yet, the genre is more complex than the tragic hero and his battle with the forces of fate and self-awareness. The events of the play or novel must also have an awesome quality to them that adds a sense of significance not available in the quotidian. These, too, are present in Hardy's novel:

The traditional basis of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as tragedy emerges at once in the plainly fabulous or hyperbolical quality of its first episode. Discouraged by his failure to get on in the world and impatient of ordinary domestic restraints, Michael Henchard, the

journeyman haytrusser, arrives at the fair at Weydon-Priors, steeps himself in the alcoholic brews of the furmity-woman, and in a drunken moment sells his wife to a sailor for five guineas. Clearly calculated to startle the imagination, to appeal to its sense for the grand and the heroic in human experience, Henchard's act of violence bears the same relation to the novel as the betrayal of Cordelia and the murder of Laius to Lear and Oedipus using such forces of retribution as will not be satisfied with less than the total humiliation of the offender and the ultimate restoration of the order offended, it will come to represent, like its counterpart in Lear and Oedipus, the violation of a moral scheme more than human in its implications. (Paterson 153)

In fact, because this style of tragedy echoes so profoundly Shakespeare's own version of it, Paterson argues that Shakespeare's plays and *The Mayor* share an affinity that had no parallel in Hardy's time:

Hardy here assumes what the literature of tragedy after Shakespeare has not found it easy or possible to assume.... Reviving a body of beliefs about man and fate, nature and society, that were once the ordinary possession of the Western imagination, he exploits a wisdom that makes possible the achievement of tragedy in the heroical sense of a Sophocles or a Shakespeare. (Paterson 152)

This affinity, then, suggests the possibility of tracing a generic thread that runs through Hardy's novel and Shakespeare's plays. This thread is likely based on a similarity of construction among the several works: devices of a particular style of tragedy common to Hardy and Shakespeare that will also, because of the generic dialogism, also resonate with comedy.

In Hardy's novel as well as Shakespeare's plays, certain constructions are deployed that operate with a seemingly-paradoxical double-voiced effect: they amplify tragedy by making it

operate in conversation with comedy. In the intercourse within a single act, event, staging or other “construction” in a novel or play, semantic elements can be identified that belong simultaneously to comedy and tragedy, and which have served both Shakespeare’s drama and later Hardy’s prose. In his analysis of such hybrid constructions, Bakhtin draws examples primarily from the English comic novel, but, bracketing momentarily the qualifier “comic” reveals the significance of this inter-generic hybridity for *The Mayor*, in that a certain element of the novel’s meaning is only realized through the interaction of the text with the conventions of other genres, specifically Shakespearian tragedy and, through it by a circuitous route, comedy. This constitutes some aspect of the “system of languages” that makes up the language of Hardy’s novel. It is in and through the approximation of its inverse that the depth of tragic pathos is achieved in *The Mayor*, and this demonstrates the critical function of double-voicedness and heteroglossia in the project of Hardy’s novel. Further, *The Mayor* could not have produced the complex aesthetic economies of sorrow and tragedy it does without invoking and appropriating a generic discourse exterior to itself, one with a complex history (including contributions from Shakespearian drama) and its own active dialogism.

The particular method by which *The Mayor of Casterbridge* achieves this, however, is of considerable interest. By constructing the scaffolds and edifices of comedy, only to dash them to the ground by subverting the expected resolutions, Hardy’s novel mimics the tragic hero’s fall from grace on a structural level. Here, it is the reader’s anticipation of comedy and rejuvenation that are led to naïve heights only to be broken down at the moment of achieving their greatest success. Shakespeare’s tragedies, like *The Mayor*, also seem to rely on this same double-voicedness in their appropriation of comedic tropes. *Lear*, *Othello*, and *The Mayor* mimic comedy, using the self-same devices as that genre, and this inter-generic quality contributes to

the depth of tragedy in all three works. In addition, it is even more likely that the inverse of this quality running through *Much Ado about Nothing* helps to activate the comedy therein.

In order to make Hardy's novel and Shakespeare's plays belie this dialogic tryst in which hybrid constructions carry an latent double-potential, it is useful to look at two specific devices (or semantic elements) that operate in similar ways across the works in question, though many more than two could likely be found. The first device is misidentification by disguise or trickery, and the second is misinformation by way of eavesdropping. Though a more lengthy analysis and cataloguing would likely be fruitful, it may suffice here to briefly identify the presence of these devices and to sketch their parallel function in the various works in question, since their uniformity and ubiquity—rather than the nuances of their individual functioning—is what pertains to the idea of a genre as an object, tending towards (though never achieving) unity, which can be borrowed, deployed, or caricatured among the various plays and the novel.

The first device—"misidentification"—occurs with great frequency and productivity in Shakespeare's plays, and is something that allows for a wide variety of plot complications. Van Elk noted its significance for Shakespeare's audience while analyzing its presence in *A Winter's Tale*. Her analysis demonstrates the striking potential of misidentification:

These works demonstrate that social identity, on which order depends, is not fixed, divinely ordained, or natural, but open to usurpation, theft, loss, or exchange.

Misidentification in these texts locates a problem in the nature of the constructions of self and other necessary to proper identification. (van Elk 326)

In the context of comedy, this sinister potential is striking and productive. It means that the comedic premises (even preposterous ones) can suggest for the audience danger as well as farce.

There is also an imbrication of misidentification and drama that suggests that it is always operating or suggested in any play, and therefore need not be restricted to single works. Van Elk touches on it when she writes that, the lesson of rogue books (like *Cony-Catching* pamphlets) is that “material signs of identity must be treated with a great deal of suspicion,” and that “*like players on the stage*, [the tricksters] can choose to present themselves as gentlemen or country rustics, upwardly and downwardly mobile at will” (van Elk 329, emphasis mine). Thus the play itself—any play—is a study in misidentification, and though van Elk limits her analysis of specific texts primarily to *A Comedy of Errors*, I would argue that misidentification and its implications are present in many of Shakespeare’s works.

Several instances of it are found in *Much Ado About Nothing*. An introductory instance occurs at the masquerade (*Ado* 2.1): Don Pedro woos Hero in Claudio’s stead while pretending to be him in disguise. While the misidentification in this case is set about for honorable ends, it is the *possibility* of its being done selfishly that gives it dramatic potential. Because it can be used either for good or ill, Don John and his minions are able to cast doubts in Claudio’s mind about both the loyalty of the Prince and the honor of Hero. Interestingly, they do this by means of a *faking of misidentification* whereby they pretend to think that Claudio is Benedick (though they know his true identity), and on that account “reveal” to the masked Claudio that Don Pedro has wooed Hero for his own. Thus, a false misidentification provides the opportunity to re-cast a positive misidentification as a negative one. Because it offers up the potential for both good and ill and involves a number of mistaken identities, this brief encounter brings to light the remarkable variability of misidentification, a quality that will allow it to operate seamlessly in both comedy and tragedy.

From a narratological standpoint, the incident's demonstrated double-potential acts as foreshadowing and lays the groundwork for misidentification to be used for ill later in the play. In the next act, Borachio boasts of having perpetrated another willful misidentification, in which he has seduced Margaret in Hero's room and called the name "Hero" in order to make Claudio and Don Pedro (who have since been reconciled) believe that Hero has been unchaste (*Ado* 3.3. 144-151). There is a two-fold mistaking of identity here. In the first aspect—the simplest—Margaret is taken for Hero. The second—more complex, in that it is a symbolic identification—comes about as a result of the first, when Claudio then "identifies" Hero (erroneously) as impure at their wedding (*Ado* 4.1. 92-99). Thus, the mistaking of the form or body leads to the mistaking of the character, which will be seen to come about similarly in *Othello*. In response to this misidentification Hero "dies," a suitably tragic effect. As a result, there follows the heartfelt and sincere guilt of Claudio. The pathos of this section of the play is clearly tragic, but because the audience is aware that Hero's death is false, the mood of the drama is lightened, in contrast to the death of Desdemona in *Othello*, which produces the opposite effect. Finally, misidentification is used to prolong Claudio's remorseful state as long as possible, and Hero is finally revealed to be alive only when her veil is lifted and she is discovered not to be Beatrice. In this final instance, then, the primary, tragic, misidentifications are overcome through another misidentification with a positive outcome, and the final misidentification is used to amplify the joy both Claudio and Hero feel at their reconciliation and marriage.

The same device appears with some modification throughout *Lear*. As a direct result of Kent's disfigurement or disguise, Cornwall places Kent in the stocks after his fight with Oswald and his rough speech following it in Act 2, Scene 2, misidentifying him as (only) a "stubborn ancient knave" and a "reverent braggart," rather than a friend of the king and a nobleman (*Lr.*

2.2. 136). Though the disguise has brought about negative results, it has also proven necessary and beneficial, in allowing Kent back into the Kings presence. Then again, as a second example, beginning in Act 2, Scene 3, misidentification becomes crucial to Edgar, as he disguises himself as Tom O'Bedlam in order to escape persecution after his having been misidentified as a traitor to his father by Edmund. These instances are indicative of a larger pattern, whereby misidentification by sleight or trickery leads characters into tragic or wrongful action—and yet also holds the potential for its reversal. Thus it belongs to comedy and tragedy simultaneously and inextricably. No matter the context in which it occurs, the possibility of devastation and recuperation are always present.

Eavesdropping operates to much the same end, but is a curiously apt tool for the creation of drama (both comedic and tragic), because it is a self-contradictory practice. In his unobserved position, the listener believes himself to be privy to candid conversation, and therefore truthful information. However, because that position is removed or distant from the immediate circle of the conversation, the listener is often allowed only erroneous, partial, or manipulated information. This epistemological paradox drives a dramatic irony in which the eavesdropping character acts confident of his newfound knowledge while the audience knows the impending tragedy—or comedy—that attends on his finding out the (full) truth.

Expectedly, eavesdropping is rampant in *Much Ado About Nothing*. The most salient examples of this, of course, are the doubled scenes of Benedick overhearing Claudio, Leonato and Don Pedro, and Beatrice overhearing Hero, Ursula and Margaret, both of which take place in Leonato's garden (2.3 and 3.1, respectively). The conversations overheard are taken to be, as Benedick notes, "sadly borne," and thus reliable (*Ado* 2.3. 223-224). However, they are merely acted to incite Beatrice and Benedick to courtship. Here the device brings together the two

antipathetic forces in love rather than swordplay, but the potential for the latter is always present. In *Ado*, the result is the eventual marriage of the two quick-wits as well as a lively romance that allows for the introduction of a number of comedic moments into the play. The possibility of the opposite, however, is always looming, and the eventual outcome hinges less on the nature of eavesdropping as the information thereby conveyed and the context in which it is understood by the listener.

In Act 4, Scene 1 of *Othello*, eavesdropping and misidentification work in concert as a sort of crux in an analysis of the two devices. As a result of Iago's manipulation, the subject of his and Cassio's conversation (Bianca) is misidentified (as Desdemona) by Othello, who is listening from a hidden position. In this instance, eavesdropping and the first misidentification (facilitated by eavesdropping's double-edged nature) combine to create a second misidentification (Desdemona erroneously identified as unfaithful), which becomes the cause of Othello's wrongly condemning, then killing his wife and ultimately, in remorse, himself. This event echoes closely the scene of condemnation in *Much Ado*, where Don Pedro and Claudio "overhear" (by spying on) what they perceive to be the debauchery of Hero. Both scenes consist of a misidentified subject of an act viewed in secret, and bear fruit in the false identification of a faithful woman as disloyal. The presence of such strikingly similar scenes in the two plays belies the potential of the device, and suggests an inter-relationship between the two genres, or at least a common stock of dramatic conventions that facilitate or produce their effects.

It is striking (though not surprising) that the events, complications, and broader plot of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* are so similar to those of Shakespearian drama. There is a rich history of scholarship tracing these relationships and suggesting a strong influence of Shakespearian drama on Hardy's writing. In an appendix to *Hardy of Wessex*, Carl Weber takes

scrupulous account of the references in Hardy's novels to Shakespeare, and remarks that "Hardy lavished a lifetime of study" on Shakespeare's works(Weber 246). From documents and first-person accounts, Weber confirms that Hardy attended many performances, including *Othello* (in 1884) and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1922), and read the plays as well, including *Lear* (in 1896). Other anecdotes both social and private, both light and solemn, indicate that Hardy was profoundly and sustainedly influenced by Shakespearean drama and tragedy. In fact, the influence was so great that Weber is led to proclaim that "more than any other English author, Hardy saturated his mind with Shakespearian words, Shakespearian thoughts, Shakespearian characters, Shakespearian attitudes, Shakespearian situations, Shakespearian humor, Shakespearian tragedy" (Weber 248). Based on this evidence it seems logical that a certain influence on Hardy's own literary production would have resulted, and Weber notes on that account that "the extent of [Hardy's debt to Shakespeare] is not confined merely to the words or lines quoted, but includes characters, themes, situations, plots, moods, ideas, and philosophies as well" (Weber 249). Because characters, themes, situations, and the other borrowed elements contribute to the concepts of genre, Weber's assertion suggests the possibility of reading generic resonances between the works of the two writers and classifying the extent of the overlap and the effects it produced.

The most striking Shakespearean echoes in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* hearken back to *King Lear*. Both plays begin with a proud and misguided patriarch whose behavior divides or disrupts the natural familial order. Paterson goes further than this incident, and finds similarities between the plots on a broader level: "Henchard travels with every stage of his decline and fall the long road by which he had come, embraces with every step the past he had denied, and rediscovers, like Lear, in the conditions of his going out the conditions of his setting forth"

(Paterson 155). For Paterson, the parallels are many and striking: both Lear and Henchard find solace in their final moments in the lowly company of socially-marginal figures (Paterson 160); both men are subject to the wrath of nature in symbolic recompense for their upsetting of the natural order (Paterson 161); and Henchard shares an affinity with not only Lear, but Othello (and Faust) in “arrogating powers and prerogatives that rightly belong to the gods,” and therefore “he forfeits ... his own humanity” (Paterson 159). It is for these reasons and others that Paterson finds that *The Mayor of Casterbridge* shares more with its early modern antecedents than with its contemporaries and that it “approximates, as perhaps no novel before or since has approximated, the experience of tragedy in its olden, in its Sophoclean or Shakespearean, sense” (Paterson 172).

This affinity for Shakespearean constructions is also to be found in Lucetta’s description of her life to Elizabeth-Jane in the third person near the end of Chapter 24, in which her dual courtships of Michael Henchard and Donald Farfrae converge in crisis that serves as an example of the duplicitous nature of these structures. One could read the improbable scenario as the premise of a farce of double-wooing (as in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*). And yet, when Elizabeth-Jane is pressed to pronounce judgment, she states simply “that’s bad” (Hardy 172), as if one could alternate between tragic and comic genres simply by declaring the tenor of the doubly-potential circumstances “bad” or “good.”⁶ But certainly the novel cannot be convicted of being simple in its inter-generic dialogism. It is only so in this single incident, which comes across as exemplary as a microcosm of what is at work in the text at large, and that is the manner in which it creates new meaning by enacting an exchange between these two genres.

As in Shakespeare’s plays, misidentification is a frequent source of drama and conflict in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. In fact, one of the social implications van Elk notes for the change wrought in the cultural order by the possibility of urban misidentification elucidates the character

of Henchard in significant ways. Henchard is one of a new class made possible by the anonymity of city life. These individuals make their money on the strength of their character and through speculation. In citing Craig Dionne's "Playing the 'Cony': Anonymity in Underworld Literature," van Elk argues that rogue books and cony-catching pamphlets

bring to light a disturbing similarity between the trickster-rogue and the self-made gentleman: "Ironically, the otherness of underworld villainy gives voice to the anxieties of a social disruption brought about by the very practices that empowered London's new corporate class: self-advancement through histrionic manipulation of the social and linguistic registers of court and state" (van Elk 327).

Certainly Henchard has taken advantage of the possibility of anonymity in the city, because his position relies in part on his behavior at the Weydon-Priors Fair remaining secret. Thus, by manipulating the potentially-nefarious aspects of urban life, Henchard has been able, like the rogue or trickster, to make himself wealthy.

A simple example of the presence of more overt misidentification in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* can be found in Lucetta's taking the name of Templeman, because of which Henchard assumes that the woman moving into High-Place Hall is only a relation of his former lover, and not Lucetta herself. This particular misidentification is relatively minor and is resolved almost immediately. However, there is a more momentous (and complicated) series of misidentifications running through *The Mayor* that provides much of the meat for the novel's plot. This multi-phase misidentification occurs between Elizabeth-Jane and Henchard, and consists of the shifting identities that the latter takes on for the former and the consequent misapplication of the titles of "relation," "father," and "stepfather." Originally, Elizabeth is told that Henchard is only "a connection by marriage" (Hardy 18). Upon the (re-)marriage of her

mother to Henchard, she considers herself his stepchild (an appropriate identification), which is upset when Henchard mistakenly identifies himself as her biological father in Chapter 19. Finally, he reverts to being only her stepfather when the true nature of their relationship is revealed by the Merchant Captain Newson in Chapter 43. Elizabeth-Jane is also the subject of an inverse of all these misidentifications as Henchard thinks of her as his own daughter because of his wife's falsehoods and then learns only too late that she is his step-daughter. Further complicating this free-for-all of mistaken identities, and running parallel to the alternating relationship between Henchard and Elizabeth, is Elizabeth-Jane's misidentification of Newsom, as his and Henchard's position relative to her conception alternate. When one is identified as father, the other becomes step-father and vice-versa. This constant oscillation provides much of the drama for the plot, leading Henchard into the myriad rash acts of both antipathy and sympathy that prolong the novel and his life as he stumbles his way towards his destiny.

In *The Mayor*, the second device comes in as a visual, rather than auditory, eavesdropping (though the novel will attempt to blur the line between the two methods). A series of simple examples of this is to be found taking place in the middle of the novel. Lucetta and Elizabeth "eavesdrop" with their eyes on the market scene from High-Place Hall, and from this vantage point are able to periodically observe and interpret the actions of Henchard and Farfrae without themselves being seen. As with other instances of eavesdropping, the women are privy to (presumably) candid information because their interloping is unobserved, but they are also unable to determine the extent of that candor because of their distance from the observed action.

One of the more interesting scenarios in which this is at work takes shape as Henchard spies on his daughter and Farfrae from the old Roman amphitheater as they meet to court in secret late in the novel. In this case, by a device in the narrative, Henchard's peeping from the

Ring allows the novel to introduce the clandestine dialogue of Farfrae and Elizabeth-Jane into the text *as though* Henchard were able to in fact overhear what was said. The text states: “Could [Henchard] have heard such conversation as passed, he would have been enlightened thus much;,” and proceeds to narrate the exchange (Hardy 306), creating the effect of eavesdropping in the text, even where it only partially exists in the actions of the plot. In this case, the text allows itself a figural eavesdropping where it would not have been possible, with the eye standing in for the ear.

While these devices undoubtedly have specific implications within the frame of the plays and the novel taken individually (for characterological and other purposes), what is useful from the standpoint of this reading is not their specificity, but their generic quality. Even beyond the limited scope of the devices mentioned, all three plays and Hardy’s novel borrow from a common stock of tropes and techniques, but deploy them to radically different ends. While this borrowing results in tragedy in *Othello*, *Lear*, and Hardy’s *Mayor*, it seems that the only variation on these techniques that is necessary to produce comedy in *Much Ado* is that they ought to result in recuperation rather than destruction.⁷

From a Bakhtinian perspective, the dialogic cross-pollination of plot devices between comedy and tragedy, as well as across generations and from drama to prose, produces an significant effect. As it does with social languages, this dialogism undermines the totalization of the generic discourse. As a result, the concept of unitary genre is undermined. Genres become tentative and mobile entities that are reconfigured as they are brought into contact with different instantiations of their conventions, both in contemporary contexts and over centuries, as between Shakespeare and Hardy.

On a more local, level, there are ramifications for the dramatic effects of the individual artwork. The possibility of *either* comedy or tragedy, as created and suspended through a similarity of construction, is key. Because the individual play or novel's structure does not belie or forego its conclusion (recuperation or destruction, comedic or tragic) but maintains the potential for both by using conventionalized structures that could equally produce either, thus invoking a hybrid generic voicing, the anticipation of the audience is maintained at the highest level for the maximum duration. Thus, the weight of either conclusion is multiplied by the refusal of the specific work to assume the mantle of either genre, remaining ambivalent until the last moment, or even beyond it. The distinct existence of the two genres and their incumbent traditions, and the possibility that a particular text can refuse to unambiguously identify itself with either one, are crucial to this specific effect of dialogic meaning-making. Thus, in addition to faithfully representing within the text a linguistic reality from the extra-artistic realm (one of the functions Bakhtin assigns to the dialogic), the inter-generic quality of the novel (as well as the plays)—the doubling of scenarios running through single premises—is an artistic device that produces a specific effect.

Bakhtin says that the novel is not doing all of this for show, that there is a greater significance to this quality of artistic prose than mere spectacle. The novel does not parade its heteroglot status as a curiosity. Rather, the novel, because of its heteroglossia, is the best medium for representing a new social reality that is itself fundamentally polyglot. For Bakhtin, "the new cultural and creative consciousness lives in an actively polyglot world. The world becomes polyglot, once and for all and irreversibly" (Bakhtin 12). No longer can poetics hold its place as the standard bearer for a unitary language whose illusion of tenability has dissipated in the context of a world where its status as "posited" rather than "given" is broadly recognized

(Bakhtin 270). However, a polyglot literature may be able to take the reigns. Bakhtin writes that the novel could “assume leadership in the process of developing and renewing literature in its linguistic and stylistic dimension” (Bakhtin 12).

In addition to this felicitous fit between a heteroglot world and the heteroglossia of novelistic prose, novels (and, it is arguable, most literary products) make use of the dialogic to create specific artistic effects. In the case of Hardy’s novel, invoking the conventions of Shakespearian drama amplifies the significance of the novel’s plot by inserting it into a long-standing tragic tradition. And, by deploying the double potential for comedy and tragedy of the structure of the events portrayed, it also suspends the closure of the events’ signification by injecting a level of ambivalence. Any event, because it simultaneously recalls the structures of both comedy and tragedy, it maintains the potential for either until the latest moment, increasing the suspense of the action, and as a consequence, the drama.

Of course, at moments, Hardy’s novel is decidedly comic, and at others it even makes comment upon its own radical proximity to comedy.⁸ But this radical proximity approximates comedy without overlapping it. The novel creates meaning *in this very proximity*, but that proximity cannot be confused with coincidence. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is not funny (at least not as a whole). But it is *nearly* funny. And while that is a very different thing than either funny or serious; it is, perhaps, the essence of its tragedy.

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Notes

¹ This denial of totalization may be the reason that Bakhtin's theories have appealed to Deconstructionists and suggested the poststructuralist reading about which Gary Morson expresses reservations in his 1991 paper "Bakhtin, Genres and Temporality" (*New Literary History*, Vol. 22, No. 4, Papers from the Commonwealth Center for Literary and Cultural Change, (Autumn, 1991), pp. 1071-1092).

² Though he was more rigid in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Morson notes that Bakhtin suggested as much in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*: "It seems to us that one could speak directly of a special polyphonic artistic thinking extending [even] beyond the bounds of the novel as a genre" (Bakhtin, *PDP* 270).

³ The essay demonstrates an intertext between the two works that hinges on misidentification—which will be discussed later in this paper in a slightly different context—in order to demonstrate a contemporary significance to issues of identity.

⁴ In fact, Meyler contends in "Bakhtin's Irony" that dialogism is inherently irreverent and that its nature is to undermine dominant discourses by demonstrating that they lack the totalization to maintain the purity of that which they authorize or to fully exclude that which they attempt to designate as Other. Noting that irony is a linchpin of this process, she argues that, "what Bakhtin can add to irony is the abrogation of authority that occurs through the auspices of dialogism" (Meyler 106).

⁵ Susan Snyder's *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies* offers some useful insights into the role comedic conventions play in shaping audience expectations—expectations that are open to subversion for specific purposes. In a similar vein, Teresa Faherty identified similarities between Shakespeare's tragedies and the conventions of the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*.

⁶ Both tragedy and comedy are more complex than this, of course, but the critical differences seem to be centered around different resolutions arriving from similar premises. In his essay "Comedy in Shakespeare's Yorkist Tetralogy," McNeir discusses the comedic trope of the trickster tricked. The trickster also exists in the tragedies (in characters such as Iago), but the resolution of the drama produced by their machinations comes about as the result of a revelation (of their trick, of their nature)(and possibly a confession), rather than a reversal of position that makes the trickster the dupe of a second trick. The locus of the comedic or tragic effect, then, resides in the resolution, not the premise, and both comedy and tragedy, particularly in Shakespeare, use the same premises to produce different effects.

⁷ Though this statement may cast the relationship between comedy and tragedy in simplistic terms, as stated above, the overlap of comedic and tragic devices *is* striking and pronounced, to the extent that the operation of their scenarios is nearly identical until it is brought to conclusion.

⁸ As at the end of chapter 25, when Elizabeth-Jane's pain at the indifference of her supposed father and erstwhile suitor is "dissipated by her sense of its humorousness" (Hardy, 178).

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